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Mounting Soviet pressure on Pakistan

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The ability of the courageous Afghan guerrillas to hold the Soviet army at bay depends on four pillars of continuing support. So long as the United States, China, and Saudi Arabia continue to provide arms and money and Pakistan stands firm in allowing this assistance to cross its borders into Afghanistan, the mujahideen have a real chance of eventually regaining their lost freedom.

But as the evolving strategy of Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev unfolds in Afghanistan, Reagan officials begin to see that it is aimed at undermining the most vulnerable and exposed of these four supporting pillars. Through an escalating series of intimidating moves, the Soviets seem determined to cut the vital supply lines through Pakistan on which the Afghan resistance must rely for arms, food, and trained reinforcements.

A primary Soviet objective in the severe fighting last year and in the

early and massive offensive this spring has been to knock out guerrilla strong points inside Afghanistan that protect the supply routes.

As the intelligence reports filtered back last week from the main guerrilla base at Zhawar in Paktia Province, Pentagon officials reluc-

tantly concluded that the guerrillas had suffered heavy losses before being able to reoccupy the base after the Soviet and Afghan armored units withdrew.

In this intensified fighting along the trails that lead into Afghanistan, Reagan officials have seen a steady improvement in Soviet tactical skill. Relying more on highly mobile special forces and much-improved intelligence, the Soviets respond more

quickly to targets of opportunity and are less easily ambushed. Careful Russian cultivation of tribal divisions has enabled the Soviets in some cases to bribe local militias that have proved effective against the guerrillas.

In addition to these intensified attacks on supply lines inside Afghanistan, the Soviets have developed a wide range of strategies designed to have maximum effect inside Pakistan and to bring increasing pressure to bear on Pakistan's new civilian government to force it to end assistance to the mujahideen.

As demonstrated in the recent savage Soviet bombing of the civilian population of the city of Kan-

dahar, the Soviets relentlessly continue to pursue their scorched-earth policy that has already driven more than 3 million Afghans into Pakistan. These homeless refugees not only become a heavy burden on the Pakistan economy but Pakistani officials have reason to fear the growing tensions between the local Pakistani population and the Afghan refugees.

In order to exacerbate these resentments, the Afghan regime's intelligence agents are paying local criminals a healthy fee for blowing up government buildings in Peshawar, the capital of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province. These bombings are then blamed on President Zia ul-Haq's involvement in the Afghan war, and secret Soviet subsidies to dissident Pakistani tribal chiefs tend to further destabilize the border region.

Moreover, since Mr. Gorbachev came to power last year, there has been a tripling in the number of deliberate violations of Pakistani territory by bombings and shellings across the border. There is an implicit warning in these escalating incidents that Pakistan had better seriously reconsider its willingness to allow Afghan guerrillas to use its territory for their base camps.

While President Zia has so far been able to stand up with commendable firmness against these

external pressures, he faces a new internal political situation that may work to the Soviet advantage. As leader of her dead father's Pakistan People's Party, Benazir Bhutto returned home last month to be welcomed by huge crowds. So far she has resisted the temptation to call for direct negotiations by the Pakistan government with the Afghan Communist regime in Kabul, as many in her party want her to do.

But if the Soviets move to replace the ailing puppet president of Afghanistan, Babrak Karmal, with someone less directly associated with the Soviet invasion of 1979, Miss Bhutto may then decide to press for direct negotiations instead of the indirect talks under U.N. auspices scheduled for May 5 in Geneva.

Given these mounting internal and external pressures for an end to Pakistani involvement in the Afghan war, the Reagan administration is hoping that the Pakistan government will continue to recognize that the most dangerous threat of all to its people would be the consolidation of Soviet power in a Communist Afghanistan on its immediate border. And only continuing and even more effective aid to the mujahideen can prevent that from happening.

Cord Meyer is a nationally syndicated columnist.
